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Your Turn Column for Independent Record

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Board of Health Supports More Protective Air Quality Rule

This spring, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed a rule to improve visibility in national parks, wilderness areas and other Class I areas and protect future visibility by reducing regional haze. EPA's Regional Haze Federal Implementation Plan would require the greatest sources of haze-causing air pollution in Montana to reduce their emissions of pollutants like nitrogen oxides (NO_x), sulfur dioxide, and particulate matter.

Those sources include three coal-fired power plants in Colstrip and Billings and two cement plants in Montana City and Three Forks.

Reductions in air emissions from these plants wouldn't just improve viewsheds. The health of Montanans should benefit as well, since all of these pollutants can be harmful. Poor air quality can cause or worsen heart attacks, lung disease, asthma, and other respiratory ailments.

Did you know that more than 20 percent of high school students in Lewis and Clark County say they've been diagnosed with asthma? Statewide, about 13 percent of adults report having gotten the diagnosis. Asthma doesn't just mean breathing difficulties; it can kill you. More than 3,400 Americans, six from Montana, died in 2007 as a result of asthma.

EPA estimates that, with added pollution controls, Ash Grove Cement in Montana City could reduce its nitrogen oxide emissions by about 58 percent. Emissions fluctuate from year to year, but last year that would have meant 825 fewer tons of NO_x in the air in parts of Lewis and Clark and Jefferson counties. Ash Grove would not have to install more controls for sulfur dioxide or particulate emissions. While not perfect, the NO_x reductions would be a substantial improvement to local and regional air quality.

The big problem with EPA's proposal is how little it would do to reduce emissions from the state's coal-fired power plants. The four units at Colstrip spew more haze-inducing pollutants into the air than the total combined emissions of the next nine largest air pollution sources in Montana.

There are proven technologies available that could cut the Colstrip emissions at two units by more than 80 percent. Yet, EPA proposes to require a technology at Colstrip that would reduce nitrogen oxides by only half – nowhere near the efficiency required at similar plants across the country. About 4,000 tons per year of NO_x would still go into the air from just the two Colstrip

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units, not to mention the substantial quantities of sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide, particulate matter, and hazardous pollutants such as mercury and lead.

Our question is, why doesn't Colstrip have to meet the same stringent air quality requirements as most other plants in the country?

A 2010 analysis estimated that 48 heart attacks, 530 asthma attacks and 31 asthma emergency room visits each year can be attributed to pollution from the Colstrip Plant. And the effects of air pollution are far-ranging, as evidenced by EPA's projection of improvements to areas as far away as Yellowstone National Park and Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota if better pollution controls are installed at Colstrip.

Air quality in the Helena area is often less than good. Lewis and Clark County already risks violating EPA's health-based standard for fine particulate matter in a 24-hour period. This could result in a mandatory plan that would place further restrictions on our home heating devices or forest management practices.

Because NO_x and other pollutants react in the atmosphere to form fine particle pollution, our local air quality would improve if EPA's proposed rule for Montana cement plants is implemented. The views from iconic vistas such as the Sleeping Giant and Gates of the Mountains would also improve and be better protected for future generations.

The Lewis and Clark City-County Board of Health recognizes that cleaner air leads to better health, especially among sensitive populations, like children and the elderly, who are most at risk for respiratory problems. The better our health is, the less money we need to spend on corrective care like emergency room visits and asthma drugs.

The Board of Health urges EPA to pass the Regional Haze Federal Implementation Plan with stronger restrictions for the coal plants. Residents of Lewis and Clark County and Montana deserve just as much health protection as citizens in other parts of our country.

*Ken Wallace, Vice Chair
on behalf of the Lewis and Clark City-County Board of Health*

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